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ABSTRACT

School choice is a controversial topic in educational politics in the United Kingdom. This paper focuses on how parents choose between state and private schools. The theoretical framework is based on P. Bourdieu's work, "Distinction" (1986). It is argued that choice is a key mechanism in the uneven accumulation and reproduction of cultural capital through education. Data were derived from interviews with 137 parents who were in the process of choosing secondary education for their children. The paper examines the following themes: comparison of the systems, the tactical choosing of schools, choice location, the role of parental principles and the child's best interests, and cultural resources. Overall, middle-class parents are familiar and comfortable with the mode of consumption operating in the state education system and, further, derive particular advantages from it. The market form valorizes certain types of cultural and social capital that are unevenly distributed across the population. The use of these capitals in choice-making and choice-getting enables certain social groups to maintain or change their position in the social structure. School choice is a critical point of cultural investment in the symbolic economy. A conclusion is that for many of the families, choice of school is a reinvestment or strategy of reconversion to conserve or enhance their class ranking. (Contains 2 tables and 13 references.) (LMI)

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On the cusp: parents choosing between state and private schools in the UK: action within an economy of symbolic goods

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On the cusp: parents choosing between state and private schools in the UK: action within an economy of symbolic goods[1]

Abstract

Choice of school remains a hot topic in UK educational politics. This paper focusses on one point of choice which is of considerable political and theoretical interest. That is parents choosing between state and private schools. Here comparision between the systems, the use of cultural resources and the role of principles and interests in choice-making are all to the fore. The paper employs ideas and concepts from Bourdieu's work Distinction (1986) to further develop an analysis of parental choice introduced in earlier published work. The central argument of the paper is that choice is a key mechanism in the uneven accumulation and reproduction of cultural capital through education.

Introduction

Given that only around 7% of children of school age in the UK attend private schools it could convincingly be argued that an analysis of choice-making related to the private sector is hardly of pressing concern or interest at the present time. In this paper I hope to demonstrate that that is not the case, for at least four reasons. First, in certain areas of the country, current and historic patterns of competition exist between state and private schools for student recruitment (see LEA and Girls papers) and proportions much higher than 7% of children attend private schools in some localities. This sort of competition has received little attention from education policy analysts. Second, as Edwards and Whitty (1995) have recently pointed out the 'entrenched prestige' which is attached to the form and content of education offered by the private sector in the UK 'has produced a persistent devaluing of alternative...versions of excellence' (p.10). In examining points of intersection between the two systems, where they stand in direct comparision, it may be possible to see how in real terms these alternatives are evaluated by parents. Third, it has been suggested by some commentators that a combination of economic recession and rising private school fees on the one hand and the creation of a strata of new,

autonomous, 'elite', state schools, on the other, may be attracting some parents, who might otherwise of chosen private school, back into the state sector ('State schools tempt the private payers' (Tytler, 1990)). Fourth, attention to this particular locus of choice-making offers opportunities for conceptual exploration and development around the much used and abused concept of choice. Specifically, it points up, in stark form, the tensions and dilemmas related to the interplay between principles and interests, collectivism and individualism, in choice-making and provides an opportunity for 'a more contextually based analysis of the stages of cultural transformation in the educational process' (Lareau, 1989 p.179). Thus, one of the main points of concern here is with 'which cultural resources individuals use when and with what effect or, put differently, how cultural resources are transformed into cultural capital' (Lareau 1989 p.179). For the purposes of this paper parents are taken to be 'on the cusp' if they are aware of or consider the possibility of choosing a private school for their child's secondary education alongside consideration of the state sector.

The analysis of choice-making in this paper draws primarily on Bourdieu's work and in particular on his study Distinction (1986) and Lee's (1993) elaboration of Bourdieu. The paper therfore rests on the premise that through education, cultural capital may be accumulated and its possession may facilitate the reproduction of the metaphorical qualities of status and prestige, that is symbolic capital. These qualities can be derived from the skilful management of social symbols. In these terms education is an investment some forms of which may realise surplus meaning.

The paper begins with a general introduction to choice and choosing and proceeds to examine five of the major themes identified from interviews with parents 'on the cusp': comparing schools, tactical choosing, choice location, principles and interest, and cultural resources. Because of the limitations of space list last is only touched upon briefly and would merit further unpacking.

Choice and Choosing.

The 1988 Education Act in conjunction with the Greenwich judgement in the High Court, has created a situation in which, in principle, there are no systemic or procedural constraints upon parents' choice of school, primary or secondary, for their children. In practice, distance, accessibility, various forms of selection or the access criteria operated by over-subscribed schools do bring constraints into play (Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz 1995). In effect any individual family chooses schools inside the idiosyncratic framework of a local education market and within the limits and possibilities of their own specific spatial, time, social and financial horizons and family household arrangements. For some families, like those I report on here, their social and financial horizons and their local education market offer the possibility of a range of schools of choice including both state and private schools. They make their choices within what we have called 'circuits of schooling' (Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz 1995). The sub-sample of parents employed here include some who have ended up choosing state schools and others who have chosen private schools but all have given some consideration to both [2]. None of the sub-sample are engaged in working-class occupations, although different fractions of the middle-class are represented. Alongside distinct patterns of social class within this arena of choice there is also a clear gendering of choice-making. Women are most commonly, but not exclusively, at the centre of the choice-making process. But the fact that they attend to the mechanisms of choice does not mean that they always have the final say. Choice-making is set witinin a complex of family dynamics in which mother and father (where both are present) and child all play a part. Relative influence and responsibility varies between families. Again there are indications here of differences between fractions of the middle-class in regard to the strength of classification of gender roles in the family.

> Mrs Dearing: It was mostly myself and my daughter... my husband stayed at home looking after the other two... he was quite happy to leave that... his attitude was that somebody's got to look after them and if we've got one person going round all the schools they can get a more objective view than two people going round and conflicting of ideas.. you know.. I'm looking for one thing and he's looking for something else. Well we discussed it when we came back from a school I said what we liked andwhat we didn't like about it...

As Reay (1995 p.1) argues choice of school 'can be viewed as the apex of a hidden pyramid of choices mothers are making on a daily basis'. Choice is a process not an event.

One of the fundamental points about choice of school, something we have pursued in a series of previous papers (Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz 1995) (Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz 1996) (Bowe, Ball and Gewirtz 1994) (Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe 1993), is that choice is a complex, subjective, emotionally charged and stressful process. Lane (1991) calls markets 'theatres of emotion', and argues that they are 'saturated with emotion, pride and shame and guilt (the three emotions that are identity-related) anger and agression: self love...[and]...the approval motive'. (Which is of particular importance, as we shall see later). It is not a simple, rational event.

Comparing.

In making a choice(s) of secondary school comparison between schools and between sectors is a primary and obvious discriminatory device. But not all parents compare in the same way. For some comparison between the state and private sector is abstract and general and reliant on blind faith or blind prejudice, or both. That is, they 'know' that private schools are better, and it would appear that all private schools are better and are always better. This is often almost a zero-sum form of comparison, the private sector has things or qualities that the state sector does not.

> Mrs. Dearing: I really wanted her to go to one of the independents, you know, the results were that much better... and then Queen Elizabeth... she didn't get in there...and then CTC and Northwark(LEA) schools were bottom of the list...(23.6.91)

Mrs. Dearing was giving some consideration to state schools but these were viewed as essentially undesirable alternatives. In contrast there are other parents who undertake their choosing via specific comparisions between and within the sectors. Schools are evaluated by specific criteria which are considered important both in general terms and in relation to the particular characteristics and needs of their child

as they see them. This is part of what we have called elsewhere *child-matching* (Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz 1996). Different schools are chosen for different children in the same family. Thus, within this process of comparison certain private schools are ruled out as unacceptable and certain state schools are not. On occasion the sort of emotive language that is sometimes used to condemn 'bad' state schools are employed against private instututions.

> Mr. Butt: We applied to Hutton, yes. I liked the way the kids taking us round were very open....I think they try to be too much of a grammar school.....so I have reservations about all the schools, including *Wilson's* so...but...I did like it, I do know somebody whose child goes there as well...so...purely on reputation...[and *Trinity school*]. There's some elements of an under-achieving school...they've got a mixed staff, some of them are good, some are not so good...on the whole...they are...there are more good ones than there are not...*Trinity* is...if it was in the state system it would probably be closed down, because it's too small...the resources are very poor, so I think they're struggling...

For some such parents child matching criteria led to a rejection of the private sector entirely on *child specific* grounds or by virtue of certain specific, undesirable qualities of a private school education. In particular, the academic pressures and competition valued so highly by some parents were a source of worry for others who felt that their child might not cope within such a schooling regime.

> Mrs. Tulley. And again...trying to match them up to the child because...he is less self starting than she is...and one side of that...people say about Todd...he'd thrive at *Dunmore* ...cos he'd like the competition...but I think the danger of *Dunmore* for Todd would be that if for any reason he started not to do well...he could take a nosedive and it could be a disaster...I've certainly seen a *Dunmore* casualty...I mean he'll either sort of go in and do everything or we'll worry about him.

> Mrs. Wallace: I think if she's been highly academic, which she isn't, I think I'd have thought very seriously about whether the state system was going to offer enough stimulation. I've found the whole system into private education

was a bit of a rat race and that people became very emotional about it. I didn't want to be sucked into it and we took a choice about 18 months ago. We decided that to put pressure on her to take the necessay exams would hamper her, I mean it was as straightforward as that. It wasn't financial, I mean we could afford to send her to private education, a private school, but having come from both sides of the system, I've seen a lot of people who've had an awful lot of their money paid on their education who've ended up really doing nothing with their lives, and equally well I've seen a lot of people come from the state system who've done extremely well. So my feelings about both systems are I don't like having to pay for it but I'm not married to the fact that the state system should or could be the best, and I've actually been a teacher too in the state system, so I've seen both sides of it.

Mrs. Theydon: I get the impression round here, even with quite bright children, that it's not really...to go for academic excellence, that you want to make sure your child is happy in a nice atmostphere, and not forced, not pushed, and I think...I don't know if we're doing right, but I mean we both were fairly academic and we can't see the point in going to a school unless the kids have to work, and obviously we think Sam is quite capable, and it would be awful if we...we wouldn't push him into it if we thought he wasn't...

There is a further issue which bears upon the matching of child to school and that is the role the child plays in choice-making. There was uncertainty, even disagreement, among parents as to how significant or decisive the child's role should be. The overall impression was of *constrained choice*. The child could be influential within the shortlist of schools approved by the parents.

Mr. Theydon: We felt that it was important...I mean we have our own views...but we feel that's it's important that James actually goes to a place that he feels happy with. I can remember when I was that age, thinking how important it was to me...my father was a school master so he knew all about education, but I felt I was old enough to make a judgement and I think James is...

Mrs. Theydon: I'm not sure he is, quite honestly.

Mr. Theydon: There are certain places that he does like, and we actually like, I think there are two at the moment...*City school* and *Prince's college school*,

Camberwick, they would be our....I think they would be my two favourites, but I think Sam...

Mrs. Theydon: Yes, I think they are our's as well...but I think he liked Hutton...I mean I think he judges the schools quite differently, I mean if they've got a nice swimming pool, things like that, we're obviously not looking at it from the same angle, but I think there seems to be a consensus that *Prince's College school* and *City* are where...certainly where Sam would prefer to go...

Mr. Tulley: It's interesting, I mean I remember a conversation with a friend of ours a while ago...who was saying that when they disagreed he felt he had to take the final decision because he wouldn't want to throw it back at the child... and I suppose we ultimately thought that if it came to that we throught we would have to do that, but in fact we all agreed, therefore it didn't come down to that. We let her choose...given that we all thought *Wilson's* was probably the front runner, before the exams...I mean we both liked *Camberwick High* quite a lot, she hated *Camberwick*...we disliked the *Combined Academy*...but she preferred it to *Camberwick* because it has sports facilities on site, and she hated *Camberwick*.

The ideas of consensus or agreement here require considerable further unpicking, again in the context of family dynamics. As other researchers have pointed out it is not unusual to find different family members claiming to have made the final choice. But against this a child may be pressured into 'accepting' the parents' preference:

Mrs. Dearing: My daughter wanted to go to Princess Elizabeth, and certainly my husband was pushing for *Madley High*, and I felt very much in the middle. I liked the idea of Princess Elizabeth, being a church school, but I could see that *Madley High* exam results are much better, in the old terminology they are grammar school kids, whereas Queen Elizabeth is a comprehensive school, so you're comparing...down to academic grounds, a comprehensive to a grammar school. So we were pushing, and we had to make a decision, this was the beginning of the week, and we had to make the decision by Friday lunchtime...

There are indications throughout this data, and I put it no stronger than that, of a difference, cutting through the sub-sample, between a short term, social orientation (emphasising the child's social adjustment, social relationships and happiness) and a long term, goal orientation

(emphasising the child's future achievement, certification and job opportunities). A difference of emphasis perhaps between who the child is and who they might become. For the latter in particular schooling is seen as an effective means to store value, which can later be released as surplus meaning - that is the 'metaphorical qualities of status and prestige' (Lee 1993 p.33).

For want of a better term we could think of the processes of choice-making outlined above as *informed choice*. Such things as class size, teaching method, teacher qualifications and quality, breadth of curriculum, extra curricular activities, quality of facilities, social composition, examination performance and opportunities of access to higher education regularly cropped up in interviews as comparative criteria.

> Mr. Theydon: The facilities there [*Wilsons*] I mean no others come anywhere near it, the sheer standard of architecture and facilities...and the people...the masters that we met were pretty impressive. But...the one thing that was absolutely crucial for us...I mean we were both mathematicians...we both did science at school...and that is...why we're considering going into that side rather than the state side...is the quality of teaching...in the sciences, in state schools and in public schools...we'd gone into some depth looking at the way maths for example is taught, and we're not happy with it...we don't think the methods that are used can actually produce results. Also I think you find that in state schools there are very very few graduates who are actually teaching, which I think is terribly sad...I mean...people who say got O level maths or A level maths...teaching people up to that level...just doesn't work, you've got to see where it's all leading to...
>
> Mr. Butt: The question I asked on the sciences is... how many people have applied for medical school, because if you ask how good their sciences are they'll always tell you they're very good, but if their sciences are so poor they can't even apply for a medical school then it reflects back. You then query it and they will admit that they have a slight difficulty....so that Milton, I think they have a problem with qualified maths staff, I don't think they've got any, or very few... so that you find that there's... the comprehensive change in education of the sixties doesn't really seem to have had much effect.

Mrs. Dearing: It was an important part, yes, because without qualifications you didn't have much of a chance in... and also my daughter is reasonably bright, and I didn't want her secondary school to be wasted. You know, if she's got the ability at eleven, then I don't want it killed in secondary school...for her not to achieve her potential.

These parents bring to bear what Bourdieu (1986 p.2) calls 'programmes of perception' which enable the deciphering and decoding of a cultural object - school. Their social, familial, educational and work experiences, provide a grounding in the knowledge (saviour) and concepts which undepin the capacity to see (voir) beyond the 'basis of our ordinary experience' to the stratum of secondary meanings', that is the 'level of meaning of what is signified' (Bourdieu, 1986). Even then parents are careful to hone and develop the cultural skills of perception and appreciation involved in 'the transmutation of things into distinct and distinctive signs, of continuous distributions into discontinuous oppositions' (p.174).

Mr. Theydon: That was something that I think we discussed at the time...was that...having been out of the system for 25, 27 years, something like that...28 years...you forget how to judge schools...it was something we had to actually start to do...and we decided to look at quite a few schools, not necessarily ones that we could consider, but we just thought...just for the experience, for our learning experience to go round...it was...it is a slightly baffling experience...going round schools, trying to evaluate...it's very very hard.

Despite the patina of objectivity, in all this subjective criteria play a crucial part here, in particular those affective responses to particular institutions, often referred to by parents as clinching their first choice, which can be seen as a sort of *class fit*, a matching or expressive order or habitus between the family and the school. Here Mrs Jeynith is unusually explicit about her concerns.

Mrs. Jeynith: Hutton, I don't know...my husband and I felt very keen that she should go into a school where there is a high percentage of children coming in from homes where parents are educated. Now Northwark...a lot of parents are educated, and the children do have a sense of discipline and good behaviour, and so...I suppose it's not very good to speak of this in terms of being class conscious, but really we felt that she should mix with children who come from

good homes...and ...I don't know, we couldn't really work it out, which school might have a higher concentration of children...she should move around with children from disciplined homes.

As Kenway (1990 p.139) puts it: 'In class relations, consumption is part of the process of social distancing and closure, helping to define 'us' and 'them". Parents seek to place their children with others, or mainly with others, who are like them (see below on *social mixing*). As Bourdieu puts it: 'The agents only have to follow the leanings of their habitus in order to take over, unwittingly, the intention immanent in the corresponding practices, to find an activity which is entirely 'them' and with it, kindred spirits' (p.223). Set against this, for some, is a concern, somewhat weakly held, for the value of social mixing as part of their child's school experience (see below).

For those who choose a private school there is normally a combination of 'push and pull factors' (Darling-Hammond, 1988 p.248) in play in consideration of the state sector; that is sources of dissatisfaction with the state schools which are available and preferences related to available private schools. But as noted already, this informed comparative process does not rest upon a simple root and branch condemnation or rejection of the state sector, or certainly not in the majority of cases. For those who deliberately reject private schooling (see below) the push/pull mechanism works in reverse, but on very different grounds.

Mrs. Theydon: But that's not to say that teachers in other schools weren't inspiring...
Mr. Theydon: No, but there was a high level, there was some real inspiration.

SG: And from the schools that you've seen?

Mr. Theydon: I tell you, I've been remarkable impressed by one or two that people rudely regard as dustbin schools...in the state system, I've been to some of those and some of the commitment there...I think is absolutely amazing, I think that for example at Ramsay MacDonald...people said don't waste your time going to...I went there and had a wonderful evening. I think given their resources they do an amazing job...and Trumpton too, I was impressed with.
Mrs. Theydon: And Hutton...we were actually impressed with all the state school teachers, having rubbished them in...

Mr. Theydon: I mean their commitment to the school, I don't question...I think there are a lot of very good people.

Mr. Butt: I liked bits of them, I mean the friendliness at some of them..at say Milton... the children have gone round on their own and the staff know what school they've come from, and they recognise the school, they will actually invite them in, I mean there's an openness about it. The others...there's certain teachers who can inspire you...I was very impressed with Trumpton...at the time we were going round they were making that radio programme on it... and I think it's quite brave of staff to do that, at the same time when you've got people like me marching around...it's not an easy thing to cope with. I liked their open...honest replies.

For some parents strongly attracted to the private sector there were definite 'downsides' to private schooling or certain kinds of 'private school' which either made these schools unacceptable or which had to be weighed carefully against other more positive features, (some have already been noted above). For informed choosers the process of choice, with its aspects of child matching, usually involved finding the 'right' school for their child, where the child would flourish, feel comfortable and be happy. For abstract choosers the process of choice tended to be more a matter of getting their child into any school and where possible the 'best' school. The qualities or general reputation of the school rather than the characteristics of the child were primary. I am not suggesting a simple opposition of types of choosing here, rather a matter of emphasis.

Tactical Choosing

Two further aspects of choice need to be cut in here. One is *tactical choosing,* the other *choice location* (see below). They are inter-related. Increasingly the sort of families I refer to as 'informed choosers' are aware of and able to manipulate the complicated and deregulated choice-making system. They understand the possibility of multiple choosing; different LEAs, individual GM schools, church schools, CTCs, different private schools with different entrance exams and scholarships, the Assisted Places Scheme. They also have the social and cultural capital to gain access to and make use of informal routes to choice. As Bourdieu suggests: 'the relative distribution of cultural capital throughout

capitalist society produces for different social groupings a differential capacity for the investment of cultural value into symbolic goods' (cited in Lee 1993 p.161). Within all of these possibilities choosers 'on the cusp' will typically have in play a combination of choices made to a range of state and private schools. One or more state schools will be chosen as *fallbacks,* at least worst alternatives, if entry to or financial support for private schooling proves impossible.

> Mrs. Theydon: Yes, it would be very difficult if he didn't get into one...in a way I would say Trumpton...because I think...it's not a magnet school, I think they're about...gone grant maintained...but it's a nasty journey, Northwark Park is just down the road, and there's always the feeling that...if a child is fairly bright, and if he gets encouragement at home, then...he'll do alright anyway...and I mean the art at Northwark Park would be an inspiration to him, I know.

> Mrs. Tulley: Yes, we put Martineau, and we did that because...we thought it was 99% certain she was going to go in the private sector, and that if she did end up in the state sector, the amount of time she'd save on travelling and the amount of time she'd have to do other things, would be made up for by being local, and there being quite...probably quite a reasonable group of people going to Martineau, compared with the group who were likely to be going to Milton, which has influenced us very very heavily... almost more than the schools in some ways, is peer group.

> Mrs. Dearing: Because we couldn't guarantee that she was going to get a place in the independents, because of exam, and also being we couldn't guarantee a place at Princess Elizabeth because, although it's a church school, we had difficulties from the primary into Princess Elizabeth, and their criteria for accepting girls is very very vague...We couldn't guarantee the CTC college, because it's a new thing, so the only school we were pretty certain of actually...was Martineau, so we had to apply for several in the hope that we would have a choice of at least two.

It appears that some of these state schools, the church or grammar schools, are seen as *surrogate private schools.* That is, as sharing some of the particular qualities valued in the private sector.

Tactics also come into play in maximising the possibilities of a private school place. For a number of the parents 'on the cusp' a scholarship is crucial in enabling them to afford private schooling. Thus, a good performance in school or Common Entrance Examinations is vital.

> Mrs. Tulley: we were both agreed that she would take *Wilsons* and *Madley* and then at that point, given that we were down to what was definitely her third choice...it didn't matter a toss to us whether she did the *Combined Academy* or *Camberwick* exams...I mean we had decided she ought to do an exam before *Wilson's*, as a practice, therefore it had to be *Camberwick* or the *Combine's*, because they were both sat in the week before *Wilson's* so ...and that's the function that *Trinity* fulfils this year for Todd.

Good preparation is also important and again the cultural and financial resources and social networks of the family are all important here in advantaging certain families in competition for places and scholarships (see below: cultural resources).

Choice Location

The outcome of comparison and consideration between the state and private sector is, for most parents in this sample, situated. That is, choices are made in relation to what is on offer in a particular locality.

> Mrs. Wallace: I would be very concerned if I wasn't in this area, about the state provision I have to say...I've taught in priority areas and there's no way I would want any of my children to go through that system, not because I don't think the teachers have done a good job...but because of their peer group, and it's as straightforward as that, you look at the peer group, the children they're with, the stimulation they're going to get, the ability of the teacher to teach...relies an awful lot on your catchment area...and Riverway has an extremely good catchment area, and I presume a large majority of people adopting the state system...and that influenced me a great deal...I felt I had a choice, it could be that I didn't feel I had a choice, it could be if I had been for instance living in Northwark, for instance, I may not have felt I had nearly as much choice as I have in Riverway, which is one of the reasons why we moved from Madley to Riverway.

In some localities parents 'on the cusp' choose into the private sector because, as they see it, there is no acceptable state school available to them. In other localities similar parents choose into the state sector, having considered both state and private schools, because there are acceptable state schools. [I am not suggesting that 'acceptability' is related to simple, objective and fixed qualities of schools - see below]. In other words, most parents operate with a situated, rather than general, view of the state sector. The distribution of choices made by parents 'on the cusp' is related to the characteristics of individual, lived, local markets. Choice making is also situated in a second sense.

That is choice is socially constructed. By that I mean that motives and desires, criteria and perceptions are all formed and steered within particular social networks and sets of social relationships. They are not free floating. They are rooted in specific familty histories, class ideologies, social and class communities. This is most obviously apparent in the case of the group not well represented in this sample, the traditional or automatic choosers of private schooling. Nonetheless, the shaping of choice for others is apparent. A small number of respondents specifically mentioned that they were aware of 'pressures' emanating their social community or reference group or from the parents at their child's primary school which encouraged them in the idea that private was the 'right' choice. Lane's (1991) 'approval motive' is relevant here.

> Mrs. Harris: it was followed very quickly on that once they started junior school that your problems were not over, that it actually was going to be like this from then on...what you choose and...in an area like this there is pressure on you to look at private education...it's very very strong...25%...I mean it wasn't true of the road we started in. We all trooped to Marlborough primary but of course as you move up the housing market a bit, you suddenly find yourself terribly...just makes you question...what you're doing it for, who you're doing it for...you know...your standard state education.

Mrs Harris is begining to distance herself here from the interiorisation and conventionalisation of the signs embedded in a particular symbolic economy.

> Mr. Turner....there's also...the other thing which is my favourite...is that such a high proportion of Hannelvale primary children go to...out of the state sector. I think when your children's friends, when their peers...and to a much lesser extent this year but certainly with Beatrice's year...when all my school's bright kids are going into the independent sector, it's very hard when you've got one of the brightest kids, to say you're going to send that child into the state sector because...you're seeing...I mean what was the liklihood of her finding any peers...academically...anyone to spar against at all?

There is further aspect to social construction here. That is perceptions of particular schools, state and private, were often 'shaped' by the opinions, experiences and prejudices of particular social networks. Thus, particular schools were seen as 'up and coming', as 'going down hill', as being 'violent' or as having a 'drug problem'. The significant point here is that the same school could be 'seen' as or 'known to be' entirely different by different but very similar groups of parents.

> Mrs. Theydon: Generally you can trust other people's opinions, but when it comes to this subject...you hear so many conflicting things...I mean I can think of one school...where...somebody said..well I know somebody there and under no circumstances will I let my son go there...and you hear somebody else saying...my three sons went there and it's a great school...you really hear so many conflicting things from people whose opinions you respect in so many other ways...

<u>Principles and Interest: complex motivations.</u>

It was clear that for many parents in our sample the choice of a private school was simply a matter of 'doing the best for their child' [see below] and carried with it no concerns of principle whatsoever. Choice is a question of finding the 'best' or the 'right' school for their child. This was straightforwardly, as they saw it, good parenting. For others the issue was equally clear cut in the opposite direction. Private schooling was ideologically and politically unacceptable and would not be considered for their child. As noted already, in a few cases the parents' own unhappy experiences within the private sector were the decisive factor in their rejection of private schooling. They did not want to expose the children to the same unhappiness or stress; a different kind of good parenting.

Mrs. Parker: I wouldn't have sent him to a private school...but that's a decision that...certainly as far as my husband is concerned, he went to boarding school...and he certainly wouldn't put his child through that. I was perfectly happy in my direct grant school, but the option of...a private school in London at the present time wasn't on. I mean quite apart from financial considerations, there wasn't one that we were actually interested in looking at because basically you'll get as much through the state...I think children from advantaged backgrounds get as much through a state school as they do through...well they get more because they actually learn social skills that they wouldn't in private schools.

Mrs. Wesbury: No, no...I have very strong feelings...about that, and we're lucky because David and our other children are fairly. ...average, we don't feel there are any particular problems. If there had been any educational problems then possibly I would consider it, but that would have been the only reason. My husband has similar views.

Mrs. Manor: from Edid Blyton primary a lot of their...not a lot, a third I would say, go into the private sector which was never an option for us. You know, they go to *Wilson's* or *Camberwick* ...that's a private school, so they knew they were going to lose some of their friends or not move with them, I mean obviously they've kept in touch cos they're local.

SG: Was that money or principle?

Mrs M: Principle really...that's not to...I mean there was a point where I in fact said to John, God if I had the money I would..not...I'm very fed up with what Northwark are doing in their secondary system, and I'm glad now that schools are opting out.

For a third group of parents principles were sacrificed or compromised in the child's best interests. This often led to a situation of continuing ambivalence or uncertainty about having done the right thing.

Mr. Tulley: For Todd in fact this year there are more bright kids going into the state sector for a mixture of ideological and...and I think that if we were really starting again we might have been more inclined...we might have taken a risk

with Fletcher for everybody, but it was totally out, I mean it wasn't even on the cards for Beatrice...I mean it's probably easy to sit here and...but I think if we'd known that Fletcher was a real certainly I came away feeling slightly regretful that we didn't... but just thinking that that was a school that I could have got committed to trying to do things for.[2]

Mr. Butt: My conscience still pricks me about paying and I would actually prefer the private system to be abolished...but I also don't want them to have that sort of attitude that some of them have, in terms of money buys everything, and they're superior. Because, my ones are able, academically they'd probably be alright in most systems... but I don't want them to come out with some of the attitudes that some of them have. I want a mix of people as much as they possibly can, although it's biased I know, it is restricted, I know... the chances of them going to see people council houses...but I mean that sort of background is more likely to be in *Wilson's* than it is in the others.

Some respondents tried to re-establish a personal sense of principled decision-making by looking for certain specific qualities in their private school of choice. Most commonly this was social composition or social mix. This was described by one such parent as "the Guardian Readers cop out".

Mr. Theydon: There's quite a few drawbacks to *City* ...except it seems to have a very nice mix of pupils as well...That's the other thing that worries me slightly, in a private school...that he's going to mix with a far narrower range of kids, and I think *City* has really sort of got pupils from everywhere, all walks of life...

Mrs. Theydon: I'm not happy with any private school that is selective in sort of social class, which basically they've got to be, given that they're going to charge thousands of pounds a year. I think James has had a wonderful time at Hennelvale primary because it's been so mixed, and I'm very...I regret a lot that he'll only start to mix with different kids.

Mr. Butt: It's not only skewed on the very rich, so there's lots of people there whose parents made a lot of sacrifices for them to go there...so this sort of mix of people you get there would have perhaps been the sort of mix you might have found in a grammar school. You've also got them coming from a wide

area and you've got them coming from a wide background...whereas some of the other schools...they're a much more restricted cross section...

Mrs Tulley: Wilson's does actually take a pretty broad intake... she's certainly having to knock around with people who are not very good at a lot of things... Not socially as broad as I would like by any means but you can't have it all.

The ambivalencies evident here and the references to 'social mixing' are perhaps indications of the class location and cultural politics of the class fractions represented. There is a degree of ambiguity in their relationship to the cultural field of private schooling and aspects of that 'mode of denial' or 'dream of social flying' which Bourdieu (1984 p.370) sees as typical of the 'new consumption classes' based upon 'a group self-perception of a denial of any attachment to the social field itself' (Lee 1993 p.169). Here this is manifest in a half-hearted attempt to evade the traces of social classification. In their particular choices these families appear to be seeking to retain a degree of 'ontological freedom' and to distance themselves from the politics and morality conventionally associated with the private school sector.

Making a Choice and Getting a Choice; Cultural resources.

Some aspects of getting, as opposed to making, a choice have already been alluded to. Knowledge of and ability to 'work' the system are important. The possibilities of choice, criteria for selection or access and selection procedures in the state sector are all becoming increasingly deregulated and complicated. Some families are not aware of or are baffled by the criteria and procedures involved. The families in this sub-sample would typically invest a great deal of time and effort in gathering and coming to grips with the necessary information, either through formal contacts with schools or via friends and acquaintances. The private sector is equally obscure and disparate and the same effort was put into mastery of the systems of admission, with the additional aspect of the possibility of scholarships. Again some primaries, which acted as preparatory schools for the private sector, were the source of local knowledge about the private system and some headteachers were willing to advise and even support parents in making applications. Some such schools made arrangements for their children to sit the Common Entrance examination. Several parents employed tutors or consultants to

prepare their children for Common Entrance or to advise on the children's educational needs or suitability for particular schools. These all, of course, involved costs which cannot be met by many parents.

All the private schools referred to by parents in this sample used interviews as part of their admissions and selection procedures [and this is an increasingly common practice in the state sector]. Most of the parents recognised these interviews to be part of a process of social selection, with both child and parents 'on view' (cf Reay 1995). Private schools in particular seek to achieve a 'match' of their own between student and school. Exclusivity and high achievement are key selling points for many private schools. The social skills required to 'bring off' the appropriate 'presentation of self' (Goffman 1971) in these encounters, as a responsible and motivated parent, are part of the cultural capital and social competance which 'results from the unintentional learning made possible by a disposition aquired through domestic or scholastiv inculcation of legitimate culture' (Bourdieu 1986 p.28). Some parents are prepared and able to 'impress' and 'talk' themselves into a school place, in a very self-conscious fashion, where necessary. Dress, demeanour, language, knowledge and social contacts all play a part in the impressions 'given' and 'given off'. This is an important point of exchange od social signs and the realisation by parents of cultural value; 'cultural value... only becomes visible when the social sign within which it is stored exchanges with other social signs in the framework of a cultural code' (Lee, 1993 p.161).

Conclusion

At this particular point of intersection between the state and private sectors the relevant skills and immediate concerns of 'cultivated' choosers are very evident. The deregulation of choice in the state sector, and the increasingly clear differentiation among state schools provide some parents with an 'open market'. Within this 'open market' there is no absolute and clear cut division between state and private in the minds of most choosers. Schools are considered on their merits. Nonetheless, for some choosers the private sector carries with it systematic

advantages, of exclusivity and material superiority. By definition these cannot be matched by state sector schools, although their are some acceptable 'fallbacks'. Comparison and strength of preference also depend on context; on the make-up of the local market and the 'structure of fèeling' within local social networks. Long term familial interests are of primary importance here. Against all of this there is a group of choosers (not easily distinguishable in terms of class identity from the aobove) for whom private schooling is a possible but unacceptable choice[3]. For these parents principle or experience outwiegh interest; although they are normally confident that their children will survive and indeed do well academically in the state system.

The contexts of choice reported on here are marked by very direct competition between state and private schools. Significant numbers of parents are attracted into the private sector but there is little evidence of the sort of root and branch dismissal or condemnation of state schooling which is suggested by many right-wing education commentators and choice and voucher advocates. Nor is there much indication that parents are 'convinced' or very usefully informed by crude league table comparisions within and between the state and private sectors.

Middle class parents, on the whole, are familiar with and comfortable with the mode of consumption now operating in the state education system, and further, they are particularly advantaged by it. The market form valorises certain types of cultural and social capital which are unevenly distributed across the population. The use of these capitals in choice-making and choice-getting enables certain social groups to maintain or change their position in the social structure. School choice is a critical point of cultural investment in the symbolic economy. Schooling, of certain sorts, is an effective means of storing value for future realisation. As a form of signification, certain sorts of schooling, generate surplus meaning; '... the circulation of value can only occur when values take on objectified form through some specific instance of representation' (Lee 1993 p.162). Thus, for many of the families discussed here choice of school is a reinvestment or strategy of reconversion to conserve or enhance their class ranking. As Bourdieu

and Boltanski (1981 pp.220-21) put it: 'The education market has become one of the most important loci of the class struggle'.[4]

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[1] Private sector schools referred to in the text are in italics to distinguish them from state sector schools pseudonyms have been used. See table 1 for glossary of schools.

[2] The sub-sample refered to is drawn from a total of 137 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with parents choosing secondary schooling for their children which, in turn, is part of a larger, longitudinal study of competition, choice and access in local education markets (ESRC project no. 232858). Initially all parents mentioning the possibility of private schooling as part of their choice deliberations were identified. But it has only been possible to refer to or quote from a cross-section of those so identified. Full background details are presented only for those referred to in the text (see Table 2). See Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe (1995) for a full account of the research study.

[2] To clarify, the Tulley's elder daughter was already in private school and they throught it 'unfair' not to give their son the same 'opportunity', however if they had found Fletcher when choosing for their daughter they may have chosen it for both.

[3] A great deal more needs to be done on the fractioning of the middel-class and the relations of these fractions to schooling.

[4] I am grateful to Jo Boaler, Sharon Gewirtz, Andrew Pollard and Diane Reay for their insightful comments on various drafts of this paper. There are still issues is the paper which need further development but space does not permit that to be done in this version.

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Table 1
Glosssary of schools refered to in the text

Private	State
Mixed	
Wilsons' City	Fletcher Northwark Park Milton (GM) Trumpton (GM) Hutton (GM) Lockmere Overbury CTC
Single-sex	
Madeley High (g) Harrods (b) Dunmore College (b) Trinity (b) Prince's College (b) Camberwick High (g) Combined Academy (g)	Queen Elizabeth (girls foundation) Martineau (g, GM) Ramsay Macdonald (b)

Table 2
Details of sub-sample families quoted in the text.

No	Name	Mothers Occupation	Fathers Occupation	Mothers Education	Fathers Education	Ethnicity	Housing	Child's name
13	Mrs Harris	Independent soc. worker 2	journalist 2	gram/univ	gram/uni	w	semi-D O/O	Tim
30	Mrs Westbury	H/w ex-DHSS clerical Off 3N	Video-tape engineer 3N	gram/ dance school	gramm+ HND	w	semi-D O/O	Daniel
64	Mrs Dearing	Housework er	Chartered Acctant 1	sec to 18	FE	w	Terrace Hse O/O	Kate
84	Mrs Manor	primary Teacher 2	SE restorer builder 3M	gramm + TTC	secd + Art school	w	rented flat	Robert + William
86	Mr Butt	widower	Collge Snr Lecturer 1		sec mod + uni + MSc	w	House O/O	Daniel
82	Mr and Mrs Theydon	SE systems analyst 2	SE advert copywriter 3N	gramm + Uni	O/O + Uni	w	House O/O	Sam
83	Mrs Jeynith	hseworker/ music teacher 2	Petroleum Scientist 2	O/O + uni	BSc + MSc	a		Elishya
94	Mrs Parker	Charity course developer 2	welfare rights worker 2	DGrant +Oxford+ PhD	DG+Uni	w	House O/O	Simon
96	Mrs Wallace	financial const+ co. director 1	systems analyst consultant 2	Boarding+ Uni+ Postgrad	Gramm +univ	w	House O/O	Alice
105	Mr and Mrs Tulley	clinical psycholgst 1	professor of History 1	DGrant+ Oxf + TT + Msc	DG + Oxfd + PhD	w	House O/O	Todd
113	Mr Ul-Hassan	Hsworker	Shop owner 2	Pakistan + HE	Pak + HE	a	O/O Tearraced	Kasim